

Shadows in the Looking-glass: E. M. Forster's *Maurice*

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When *Maurice* 'came out' as it were after Forster's death, reviews were on the whole unappreciative. The story was too idealised and romantic, a wish-fulfilling 'fairy tale' with double implications; it also seemed outdated, though inevitable owing to the time of its composition, after the decriminalisation of homosexual intercourse and the sexual liberation of the 60s. Forster himself wrote on the typescript, 'Publishable – but worth it?'² The verdict it seemed was to be a no, it wasn't; or perhaps a half-hearted yes in homage to its author.

It would initially seem difficult to defend Forster against these accusations. Indeed, some of the writing towards the end is just so ripe for satire. It is rather discouraging for instance to find decidedly naïve passages such as:

Yes, he was in luck, no doubt of it. Scudder had proved honest and kind. He was lovely to be with, a treasure, a charmer, a find in a thousand, the longed-for dream. But was he brave? (p. 200)

The streak of the desperate old maid in Forster's works³ is here exposed to the full. The story also has some highly risible aspects owing to clichés later associated with homosexuality. The original ending in which Maurice and Alec reappear as woodcutters immediately invites us to imagine the mousy Forster at the time of the composition singing the lumberjack song from the Monty Python sketch. I personally laughed out loud when I read the following passage and found myself humming 'Go West'⁴.

There was something better in life than this rubbish, if only he could get to it – love – nobility – big spaces where passion clasped peace, spaces no science could reach, but they existed for ever, full of woods some of them, and arched with majestic sky and a friend . . .

The song by the Village People celebrating the gay liberation on the west coast, was later given a cynical twist by the Pet Shop Boys, drawing parallels with the post-cold war illusions of the capitalist west in their music video. The west coast utopia had by then become a tainted dystopia with the emergence of AIDS, which further outdates *Maurice*, and the liberation movements of the socialist east, which were welcomed with enthusiasm from both east and west, and from the new left and the old right, were also to face disillusionment. Perhaps it is that between *Maurice* and us lies the whole of the last century in which humankind painfully grew out of all kinds of utopian visions, sexual as well as political.

Where the phrase 'Go West' was originally a slogan promoting the colonisation of western America, Forster's dissolution of utopian hopes finally came about when he wrote on the colonised East. *Maurice* was written while Forster was suspending his plan for the Indian novel that was later to become *A Passage to India*, and could be described as Forster's passage to *A Passage to India*, in which utopian loves across races break down. In *Maurice*, love comes quickly at Maurice's bidding, 'Come!' (p. 167), which indeed may sound ludicrous⁵. In *A Passage to India*, love does not come: as Godbole says, 'I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.'⁶ Not yet, not there.

Though one merit *Maurice* definitely has is that it reveals that what is really at stake with the issues of class, gender/sexuality and race, all of which Forster treats in his works, is love, not politics. To see Maurice in terms of a madpoofter in the attic⁷ and blame everything on bourgeois, patriarchal/homophobic, imperialist ideology would be to ignore what the story offers to inform us about the dialectics of love, which I find considerably more interesting. As any scenario of wishfulfillment always has something more complex than what first meets the eye, Maurice is not without its engaging elements, which preclude the story from being dismissed as having nothing more in it than outdated politico-sexual ideals or sad masturbatory dreams.

Let us begin by looking at what might be called the Forsterian window fantasm, which is here given some interesting elaborations. Indeed, should we focus on the aspect of enclosure we would be at a dead end ourselves, or perhaps be inclined to burn the house down in desperation: note the letter-burnings in *Maurice* (p. 57, 186) which are of no avail. What homosexuals who do 'not live in a house that can be destroyed in a day' (p. 69) should seek for instead is an egress, and the right way to get through it. One of the contemporary reviews of *Maurice* was entitled 'Open windows'⁸, and mockingly refers to the repetition of window-climbing in the story. When I read this I had no doubt that this was an allusion to a poem by Philip Larkin, but realised later that the poem's title was '*High Windows*'. Nevertheless this reference would serve as a paradigm for considering the nature of the Forsterian window. Larkin's poem opens with the sexual liberation of the younger generation in the 60s, which the narrator in turn compares to the secularisation and loss of faith of his own generation. These are none other than the ideals Maurice himself struggles for in a preceding era with a much severer social climate. With Larkin the comparison leads to a sudden vision of a window, which, though shut, is sublimely transparent:

[. . .] And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.⁹

This sense of liberating hollowness is precisely what I find lacking in Forster's novels. We must not confuse this 'deep blue air' with the sky over the greenwood. Larkin's high windows are what emerge after all utopian hopes have been spent. Outside Maurice's window there lies rather

'the darkness where he can be free' (p. 166). Maurice, as Clive observes, is 'essential night' (p. 212). This window is also a locus of haunting, and seems sometimes to be filled by an almost suffocating presence. Another allusion which I thought the title 'Open windows' might be to was a short story by Saki called 'The Open Window', in which a girl lies to a visitor that her father and brother had drowned in a bog, and feigns horror at their returning figures in the window frame, making the visitor run away. This simple schema of a frame realising objects *qua* what ought not to be there, which could be one way to define the effect of the uncanny spectral, is central to the Forsterian window.

I would suggest that the following passage on Maurice's childhood phobia, which is truly intriguing, points to what is at the core of this window fantasm. The fundamental flaw in the film version to my mind is the total omission of this scene which is so crucial in reading Maurice, in our attempt to 'interpret him' (p. 25).

The trouble was the looking-glass. He did not mind seeing his face in it, nor casting a shadow on the ceiling, but he did mind seeing his shadow on the ceiling reflected in the glass. He would arrange the candle so as to avoid the combination, and then dare himself to put it back and be gripped with fear. He knew what it was, it reminded him of nothing horrible. But he was afraid. In the end he would dash out the candle and leap into bed. Total darkness he could bear, but this room had the further defect of being opposite a street lamp. On good nights the light would penetrate the curtains alarmingly, but sometimes blots like skulls fell over the furniture. His heart beat violently, and he lay in terror, with all his household close at hand. (p. 23)

I have actually tested this myself and studied my shadow reflected in a mirror. It does prove to be quite chilling. Having considered why, I have reached the conclusion that it is because this makes you effectively come face to face with your Doppelgänger. Maurice 'did not mind seeing his face in' the looking-glass, because a mirror-image is not exactly a Doppelgänger if you look at it carefully enough: when I lift my right hand, he lifts his left. He is my likeness, but nevertheless an other. A Doppelgänger which is perhaps more real would be produced by 'casting a shadow on the ceiling', but it would always be facing away from you. It is when that shadow is reflected in a mirror that you could see your shadow facing towards you, and the likeness of yourself being looked at right in the face by a truly real Doppelgänger. I have also found out that the more common device to produce the effect of the uncanny of juxtaposing mirrors is not half as scary, for what you see are, though infinite, mirror images all the same.

This effect of the Doppelgänger is then transferred from the looking-glass to the window. The assembly of [candle, Maurice, shadow on ceiling] is now reversed, as it would be when it is reflected in a mirror, and identified with the assembly of [street lamp, something outside, blots like skulls]. Probably the skulls originate in the impression given by the 'Holbein photograph' (p. 21) from Mr Ducie – a correlative of his sex education – which is probably that of 'The Ambassadors' (National Gallery) with the anamorphosis of a skull¹⁰. As the skull in the painting cuts through the perspective in this picture, the shadows distort Maurice's perception of the room, by suggesting the presence of a Doppelgänger outside the window, which is all the more

real because it is veiled by the curtains. It is by identifying this something outside with his childhood sweetheart, George, instead of an intimidating skull which stands for heterosexual copulation and death", that Maurice could overcome the spectral and reach peace. The function of lost George is then formulated into his notion of a 'friend' (p. 26), a love object, which Maurice later seeks in Clive and Alec.

This childhood phobia and its solution in adolescence basically determines the structure of the window fantasm throughout the story. The plot could be summarised as a tale of love betrayed and love attained, presented in a distinct contrast, which could be seen as two versions of reenacting this fantasm. 'The two sections [i.e. the first half and the second] run almost exactly parallel: Part I ends with Maurice entering Clive's window in response to his call; Part III concludes with Alec entering Maurice's room in response to a similar call.'¹² These window-climbings may sound but are not ludicrous, for they convey a logical working-out of Maurice's fundamental fantasy. That Clive says in his last meeting with Maurice, 'You gave me to understand that the land through the looking-glass was behind you at last' [my italics] (p. 212) is significant. We do not know whether Maurice had ever told Clive about the solution to his childhood phobia, but even if Clive simply meant to say that homosexual love belongs to a world of monstrosities à la Lewis Carroll, the word *looking-glass* resonates with the fact that what Maurice is doing at this stage is enacting his fundamental fantasy by going out of the window, which was originally identified with the reflection in the looking-glass, to reach peace in embracing the 'friend' outside,

It is worth noting that in both cases Maurice sets out to produce love-hauntings by instigating and turning down love, seeking to summon the 'friend' image through reenacting the conquest of his phobia thereby. This haunting makes a violent return when Clive leaves Maurice – 'How could he sleep and rest if he had no friend?' (p. 119) – and takes on a definitely spectral character as he grows fearful of Alec's betrayal. Allusions are made to 'vampire' (p. 183) and 'spooks' (p. 186), and rain or mist, one of Dracula's mobile forms, by now is a key feature for the realisation of the window fantasm after the two decisive nights in his approach to Clive (p. 41, 62). Also Maurice's thought that his love with Alec is lost flits in 'his brain, like a bat' (p. 208). The spectral dis/communications in this process is also interesting: 'However pleasant Clive and his wife were to him, he always felt that they stood at the other end of the telephone wire' (p. 134); that 'Letters distort even more quickly than silence' (p. 78) is fully demonstrated through Alec's correspondence.

In the ending, Maurice finally pairs off with his 'friend' Alec out of the window into 'the darkness where he can be free' (p. 166), leaving Clive to return to 'the darkness of a house' (p. 166). Was it then, that his relationship with Clive was an unnecessary detour? On the contrary, Maurice says that it was Clive who had paved his way.

'Who taught you to talk like this?' Clive gasped.

'You, if anyone.'

'I? It's appalling you should attribute such thoughts to me,' pursued Clive. Had he corrupted an inferior's intellect? He could not realize that he and Maurice were alike descended from the Clive of two years ago, the one by respectability, the other by

rebellion, nor that they must differentiate further. (p. 214)

Two years would only bring us back to the summer of their graduation, but what is probably meant here is that the way Clive behaved as a lover had determined Maurice's path. And that was largely determined by his readings of Plato. We are told little of what exactly Clive drew from *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* (p. 67); Clive also models his relationships on 'The love that Socrates bore Phaedo', though all the description we get is that it is a 'love passionate but temperate, such as only finer natures can understand' (p. 91). But Clive's gesture of lying beside Maurice on the night before his departure to Greece (p. 103) suggests distinct passages from the former two dialogues: that in which Alcibiades tells the banqueters of Socrates' desisting from consummating the relationship with him¹³, and that in which Socrates preaches that a lover should refrain from consummating his love, even when he has the chance to 'lie side by side' with his beloved, by keeping a tight rein on his physicality¹⁴. Clive's discussion on aesthetic judgements and desire (p. 86) could be an allusion to the imagery of the two-horsed chariot in *Phaedrus* which is also employed in the latter. The passage directly before this is read in Mr Cornwallis' translation class in the film version, which endorses my assumption, though it seems rather strange: if the Dean wanted to omit the 'reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks' (p. 50), why did he choose this dialogue on Greek love in the first place?

The passage the student is told to omit in the film is also an odd choice, for it is in fact devoid of physicality, and is also an important passage, in which Socrates explains the process by which love is returned (255C-D) : when a lover beholds the beloved, a flowing stream of beauty pours into the lover through the eyes, which in turn overflows back into the beloved, and fills him with love.

So he loves, yet knows not what he loves: he does not understand, he cannot tell what has come upon him; like one that has caught a disease of the eye from another, he cannot account for it, not realising that his lover is as it were a mirror in which he beholds himself.¹⁶

Philippe Julien comments that this is precisely what is at stake between Alcibiades and Socrates in *Symposium*: Socrates, by refraining from responding to Alcibiades' demand for love, effectively displaces him from his position of the beloved to that of the lover¹⁷. By speaking of this in public and praising Socrates' virtues, he defines the object of his fantasm, or *agalma*, which is distinguished from the object of simply narcissistic love. Socrates then praises Agathon, who he points out is the real object of Alcibiades' love. 'By this *triangulation* he satisfies him by presenting him an image of himself, the image of the erastes [lover] desiring the same eromenos [beloved]: Agathon.'¹⁸

What Clive had done 'over the original Symposium business', according to Maurice, was to say, 'Here's a certain statement, I shall keep you to it' (p. 189). The aforementioned gesture of lying beside Maurice is almost an examination to see whether his student has learnt his Plato and assumed the position of Socrates. Though their falling in love was mutual, Maurice waited until Clive made his confession, and climbed through his window, thereby assuming the position of

the beloved, not the lover. That he initially tries to get into a top-floor room in order to attain liberation should be hard to explain from the madpoofter in the attic line of argument. It is through being kept in frustration, and finally rejected the demand of love, as Alcibiades was by Socrates, that he comes to construct his fantasm and change his position to that of a lover. The references to the 'friend' while Maurice was still with Clive (see p. 49, 63 and also p. 52) are not clearly articulated in his conscious mind. It is Lasker Jones' mock-analysis which occasions him to dream and speak of the 'friend' (p. 159), and he realises his fantasm by applying this to his latent feelings for Alec (p. 180) and calling out 'Come!' (p. 167) He could now declare clearly and distinctly his 'friend' fantasm in his own voice (pp. 172-3).

Hence the inevitability of meeting Alec in Penge of all places: Maurice/Alcibiades must receive his beloved Alec/Agathon in Clive/Socrates' room, for that was where he had been left deserted. Clive 'is as it were a mirror in which he beholds himself', and Alec comes into the place of the shadow behind Maurice. Maurice is not aware of him at first, because he is too engaged with his mirror image, Clive.

I would like to add some tentative comments on the connections with Forster's biographical life¹⁹. P. N. Furbank has it that Clive is basically H. O. Meredith, a Cambridge contemporary (Introduction, p. 8). Nicola Beauman proffers a new theory that Maurice is modelled on a certain Ernest Merz who hanged himself on the morning following Forster's first meeting him at an extended dinner and a walk together, hence his determination to prepare an alternative happy ending for him, instead of 'a lad dangling from a noose' (p. 218)²⁰. I am personally inclined to see the story in terms of Forster's expression of resentment against the friendly but sexually unresponsive Syed Ross Masood/Clive.

Maurice was not without its effect on Forster's life. He modelled his own sexual liberation on Maurice's encounter with Alec. He described his first full physical contact, 'It is as if (in the novel) A[lec] had been ordered to come and then dismissed at once.'²¹ In the course of a more cautious and enduring relationship with the tram driver Mohammed el Adl, Forster grew anxious about his betrayal and had a tiff in which he behaved 'curiously like Maurice towards the end of the book. I have found it so hard to believe he was neither traitor or cad'²², which would strongly suggest the existence of a counterpart in Forster's own psyche to Maurice's window fantasm and the dialectics of its solution.

Notes

¹ See Julian Mitchell, 'Fairy tale', *Guardian* in Ed. Philip Gardner, *E. M. Forster: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 439-40.

² E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (Penguin Classics, 2000), Introduction, p. 10. Quotations from *Maurice* are from this edition.

³ A contemporary reader of *Howards End* imagined 'Miss' Forster to be an old maid, and a character modelled on Forster in Graham Greene's *The Third Man* (Dexter) is described by his enemies as having an 'old-maidish' style (Nicola Beauman, *E. M. Forster* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 224).

⁴ Of course, the lyrics of the song go: 'Life is peaceful there / Lots of open air / To begin life new / This is what we'll do / Sun in winter time / We will do just fine / Where the skies are blue / This and more

we'll do . . .'

⁵ Julian Mitchell, 'Fairy tale', p. 440.

⁶ E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 96. We might remember here that the mysticism of Carpenter, who inspired *Maurice*, was described as 'yogified' in Forster's 'Terminal note' (p. 217). The guru-image seems to have proved powerless.

⁷ Pace Ms Keiko Kawamura, who made this point that Maurice could be seen as a homosexual equivalent of the rebellious womanhood against domestic ideology, on the fact that Maurice sleeps in the attic lusting after Dickie (chapter 29) in her presentation given at the University of Tokyo on 26th January 2007.

⁸ C. P. Snow, 'Open windows', *Financial Times* in Ed. Philip Gardner, *E. M. Forster: The Critical Heritage* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp.433-6.

⁹ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (The Marrell Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Links could be made with Jacques Lacan's comments on this picture, which I shall not go into here. For further discussion, see Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (Penguin, 1979), Chapter 7, and Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), Chapter X.

¹¹ Freud speculates on the essential relation of the two in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which I shall not go into here.

¹² Robert K. Martin, 'Edward Carpenter and the Double Structure of *Maurice*' in Ed. Jeremy Tambling, *E. M. Forster* (Macmillan, 1995), p. 101.

¹³ *Plato's Symposium* (The Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), p. 60.

¹⁴ *Plato's Phaedrus* (The Library of Liberal Arts, 1952), p. 106.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 105.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Philippe Julien, *Pour lire Jacques Lacan* (E.P.E.L., 1990), pp. 120-3. This is a comment made in the course of his explanations on Lacan's seminar VIII, in which Lacan compares the analyst's handling of transference to Socrates' dealings with Alcibiades in *Symposium*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 123.

¹⁹ There is an another possible connection which I shall not argue in detail. While in *Maurice* a full confrontation in court remains a threat (p. 196), in *A Passage to India* the matter actually goes to court, which Furbank suggests could be Forster's attempt to work through his childhood memory of having been sexually molested while strolling on the sea shore (P. N. Furbank, *E. M. Forster: Volume One*, (Oxford UP, 1979), p. 38). The opening scene of the sex education on the sea shore may be resonant with this incident, after which he was given confused preachings from the master.

²⁰ Beaudrillard does not quote this, probably because she questions the reliability of the 'Terminal note' which explicitly states that the story was finished in 1914. I feel that the apparent lack of decisive proof that Merz was troubled by his homosexual tendencies goes strongly against this theory, though it is still possible that the incident provided one source among many.

²¹ *Ibid*, Volume Two, p. 35.

²² *Ibid*, Volume Two, p. 39.